An introduction to Ross Dowson: Harry Kopyto

Occasionally, a stage of history creates space for someone who dares to dedicate his life to clear the path for his fellow human beings and who has the talent, originality, motivation and insight to contribute massively to that goal. This was the calling chosen by Ross Dowson (1917-2002) whose span of social engagement in Canada's class struggle over almost six eventful decades stands as a radiant example of what can be achieved by those fighting for the socialist transformation of society.

Dowson was raised in Toronto, the youngest son of a large family whose parents were skilled workers. As a teenager growing up during the 1930s, the Great Depression forged two qualities that guided him throughout his life—an unquenchable curiosity about the causes of the human misery surrounding him and an abiding solidarity with its victims. Added to this was an unwavering commitment to action which soon led him to play the central role as the leader of organizations in Canada associated with the views of Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Russian revolution and the nemesis of Joseph Stalin, who usurped control of that revolution in its ebb and destroyed its goal of socialist democracy.

It was logical for Ross Dowson, with his anti-authoritarian disposition, to choose the revolutionary Marxist path in opposition to Stalinism. But he also saw the need for socialists to assert democratic demands and a transitional program addressed to the objective needs of the workingclass. He advocated the need to construct a political instrument to achieve those goals through mass struggle. The 1930s witnessed Dowson's first affiliation with a Trotskyist organization as well as his involvement with the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, an imperfect expression of, inter alia, independent labour political action at that time.

The Trotskyist movement was declared illegal during the Second World War and its remnants were forced underground or dissipated until Dowson assumed leadership in 1944 and reorganized the movement becoming National Secretary and the editor of its paper. The post-war radicalization witnessed the consolidation of the movement, whose composition was largely proletarian, and its rebirth and broad appeal, witnessed by Dowson receiving over 20% of the vote for Toronto mayor in 1949. But the retrenchment of capitalist democracy in the early 1950s and the virulent red-baiting accompanying it soon shrivelled the Canadian movement and also contributed to the international Trotskyist movement split in 1953 (and not reunited until ten years later with Dowson's personal participation).

A handful of Dowson's comrades in Vancouver and Toronto hung on during the rest of the dark decade but suddenly were greeted by a youth and student radicalization in the 1960s following the Cuban revolution and rise of Black resistance in the US. Dowson, as head of the League for Socialist Action/Ligue Socialiste Ouvriere (LSA/LSO), shined during this time. He developed and oversaw most, if not all, the tactical and strategic positions and actions which transformed an organization of a few dozen at most to one of hundreds, recruiting many of the best activists in the women's liberation, anti-racism, student, gay rights, labour and anti-Vietnam war movements.

Until this point, the labour-based New Democratic Party, which had replaced the CCF in 1961, was the central focus and key to the political orientation of the LSA/LSO. By 1974, however, a decline in the radicalization, once again, caused the pendulum to swing, this time in the form of the LSA/LSO disintegrating under ultraleft pressures, and abandoning its historic NDP orientation. The Forward Group, which emerged from ensuing political chaos, under Dowson's leadership, continued in the best traditions of the LSA/LSO but declined following a debilitating stroke suffered by Dowson in 1989 from which he never recovered and met his death in 2002.

The Ross Dowson Archives lift the curtains on Ross Dowson, both the man and his work. It may be said without exaggeration, that they reveal the work, writings and achievements of an extraordinary organizer and educator, an original thinker, a worker-intellectual, sharply critical without succumbing to sectarianism, a remarkable capacity for anticipating political currents, and a multitude of writings that contain analysis based on theoretical studies, activism, and objective research. Dowson's writings on Quebec, Canadian nationalism, the labour party question, trade union work, Canadian history, Stalinism—not to mention art and culture—are both seminal and prescient.

Dowson, more than anyone else, represented the continuity of Canadian Trotskyism. He combined his own generation's experiences in the blue-collar working class with the youthful dynamism of the mass movements of the 1960s, providing structure, political direction and understanding to their foundational struggles and those engaged in them. Many if not most of his adherents have gone on to play sometimes central roles in the labour, feminist, academic and political milieus since their tutelage under Ross Dowson.